

THE SHADOW OF MERCURY

by B. Bernstein

The item that headlines our discussion prompts a straightforward response. Today's market system places artistic creation in jeopardy, which is a well-known, experienced and described fact of life and a platitude. Jenny Holzer long ago lampooned this self-evident concept in one of her truisms that reads Money creates taste.¹⁾ The problem under discussion has evolved into a colorless cliché applied in everyday usage. It lends itself to a Pop art operation performed as a "transfiguration of the commonplace" in the words of Arthur Danto.²⁾

At first glance it appears difficult for us to add something else, except perhaps for a point of view taken from places that are not typical; then our narration will exude a refreshing ethnographic flavor and our view from "the outside" is likely to prove detached and unbiased. Shall we select as such a place a small Baltic republic that looks inconspicuous on the art scene of the world and that now finds itself in the spotlight for political reasons.

Estonia's art was "annexed by socialist realism" right at a time when the Soviet Union was terror-stricken by a tidal wave of bitter antiintellectual campaigns that produced the most devastating effects. But soon after Stalin's death people began to wake up from that cultural lethargy bit by bit. On the one hand, their awakening was boosted by their growing national awareness and, on the other, it was unfolding in a society where all the values were rigidly hierarchized in line with

its system of total ideological hypocrisy and in a society that was plagued by official xenophobia on top of being a closed one. Nonetheless for reasons that are irrelevant to our discussion the Estonian art of the 1960s and the 1970s has its own history that is comparable to the events affecting the then arts of the Western world. By the second half of the 1960s Estonia had succeeded in building an environment of relative aesthetic pluralism in its arts. Even though works of "official art" occasionally emerged there, there was no division of art into "official" and "underground" movements. Western experiences were no longer off limits and numerous trends of the avant-garde of the day echoed across Estonia, though toned down a little and interpreted in local styles. At the same time, the artist's individualism was appreciated higher than the artist's loyalty to doctrine. Those were the qualities that made art and the artist enjoy a status of exceptionality. In that atmosphere of never-changing routine any gesture that broke away from routine assumed a dual meaning: any non-participation, any breach of the ground rules and any violation of prescribed procedures and expectations were regarded as a rebellion. The initiated learned how to appreciate one's display of fortitude and the measure of one's artistic non-conformism proper but the halo of human dignity and independence was for everybody to see. Art appeared to be an island and a school of freedom in that society that lacked freedom. The context was there to convey the right message: any authentic creative action assumed a social and moral meaning regardless of its specific semantics.

In recent years the context has undergone a change and art has been set free. The artist is free to abide by the Telem convent's regulations that are known to have had just one rule "Do as you like", which means, firstly, no outside circumstances support, or justify art, and, secondly, art should sustain its own cultural status by its own means. Art should remain only art without any connotations that arise out of its social context. Perestroika's other aftereffect is that the curtain that barred us from the rest of the world has become transparent on both sides, though still in place. The distance between things that are "here" and things that are "there" keeps on shrinking at a fast pace. As a part of Soviet art, Estonian art now keeps in touch directly with the international world of art and, like any other art, experiences strong impacts made by trends currently in vogue and the art market. Estonian art is likely to go through two stages. The first stage is evident now: people show a heightened interest in things Soviet and their interest is sustained by the exotic origins and the unusual material of Soviet art. The second stage is expected to become one of real integration into the international milieu of world art that evolves according to its rules of artistic success and social survival. One way or another the freed artist has found himself facing the temptations of the art market. Our artist is more helpless than any other national, for he has grown accustomed to meagre fees established by doctrinal egalitarianism: the likelihood of fetching big "hard currency" prices for his works may shatter the strongest moral principles. At first it appears that the

time has come for the artist to reap awards for his loyal service to art. One does not need to be a prophet to foresee that forgiving compromises and unnoticeable betrayals will be inevitable. I am referring to our betrayal of some ideal model fashioned to guide creative activities, a model that is put to an exacting trial under a totalitarian regime and equally in the context of an institutionalized art market. It is the latter contradiction that we are examining now.

According to a definition developed by a famous sociologist the "art world" includes people who produce, execute, sustain in financial terms and appreciate art. Even though some of those people are conventionally described as "artists" vested with a responsibility for works of art, I deem it sociologically meaningful to regard a work of art as a joint work of all those people. They coordinate their activities in pursuance of a body of conventional interpretations that are embodied in common practice and "art world" artefacts.³⁾

Today's art world is split down the middle and the crack runs along everywhere, from top to bottom, piercing practices and and conventional interpretations. What opposes one another is not so much faces as paradigmatic models. I called one model ideal and let us call the other the market one for conventional purposes. To give graphic illustrations I will quote fragments of interviews and aphorisms coined by a prosperous New-York artist as emblems of the market model:

Q. Which would you rather sign: a painting, an autograph, or a check?

A. Which side of the check?

Q. Is there anything else you would like to add?

A. Just lots of zeroes to my prices.

Paintings are doorways into collectors' homes.

A dealer should not have a stable of artists. An artist should have a stable of dealers.

Take the L out of Play.

Take the R out of Free.⁴⁾

The last two aphorisms are especially noteworthy, for a operation of linguistic castration was performed ~~not only~~ on the two fundamental tenets of the ideal art model - the concepts of freedom and play. I am hard-put to resist the temptation of quoting the famous comment made by F. Schiller "Amidst the horrible kingdom of force and amidst the sacred kingdom of law aesthetic creative awakening is building unnoticeably the third joyous kingdom of play and visibility where it releases man from the bondage of all kinds of relations and makes him free from anything called coercion both physical and moral".⁵⁾

Two hundred-year-old memories serve as an apt description of the ideal art model because the model itself kept on evolving for ages and one may see the traces of various ages still visible in it. The ancient heart of the model is the Zeuxippe legend. He said that his works were beyond all price in the literal sense, or "nullo pretio satis digno permutare posse".⁶⁾ It stands to reason that here we are not dealing with an exceedingly high price metaphor but rather with a concept describing a perfect work of art that no amount of money is large enough to buy, for perfection does not lend itself to measurement. It also implies that artistic worth displays itself to the

full only in the highest heaven and remains untainted by base interest, etc. Humanists and artists of the Renaissance picked up and amplified the concept. They renounced the artist's status as an artisan and moved him from under the sign of Mercury over to the sign of Saturn, a star worshipped by melancholic and insane persons and men of genius. The age of Romanticism put the final touches on the artist's myth by placing him atop all things created " the way people relate to other creatures of the earth is the way artists relate to people"⁷⁾ and the artists are "the highest caste of Brahmins who are noble not on account of their birth but on account of their self-consecration"⁸⁾ There followed their special ethics of duty toward their art. This was their specific deontology that differed from any other not only in its missionary zeal and priestly devotion but also in that the artist felt duty-bound to worship his own individualism and creative freedom. Since art should be viewed as a value and end in itself, even if any semantic needs to be cut off, the trinity of individualism, creativeness and freedom served as a structural frame to support a model for artistic creativity. I do not feel I ought to describe the model in minute detail: the adjustments it has undergone in light of 20th century experiences have not altered its essential features. Its historically evolved multi-layer structure rendered it intrinsically uncoordinated and its elitist motifs coexist with its enlightening and democratic ones but we still view the model as a desired standard in our mind's eye. Geared toward this end the artist's work finds itself in opposition to the utilization by totalitarian

regimes of art as a tool of indoctrination and a way of satisfying "dirty" commercial interests that convert art to items for sale, that is, to a means of attaining objectives that have nothing in common with art.

Nonetheless these opposing applications are basically different from one another. No matter what its modern modifications look like, totalitarian violence exerted on art results in antiquated conceptual and institutional forms being imposed on today's art. As regards the art market, it constitutes a paradoxical creation and continuation of the ideal art model.

Indeed, owing to its nature and thrust the model lacks a specific institutional hypothesis. How should the artist's life be arranged and sustained? How do works of art move and how are they distributed and consumed? How does art fit in with social structures, art being a cultural excess that man needs? In this sense an ideal model is capable of representing ideal silhouettes alone: for instance, enlightened, selfless and generous patrons of art, whether they are private persons, corporations, or governmental departments. The conceptual void was filled with practical and empirical experiments and the market, or the commercial component of the art world went on to evolve naturally into one of its more powerful mechanisms, if not the most powerful one. The absurd phenomena of the "economy of taste" appear to follow their own logic. The works of the quattrocento painter was commissioned on clear and simple terms: the artist was paid for the time he spent on his work (calculated according to the number of figures he

painted) and for the quantity of expensive paints (gold and ultramarine). But is there a way of calculating the cost of his talent he invested in producing a masterpiece? If a great masterpiece is priceless, no clear relationship may be established between the worth of a work and the fee (or the auction price). In cases like this anything is possible: from a nil price for a work that the market rejected to fabulous prices that skyrocket at auctions (the art market recently has reached the 500 percent rate of inflation annually against the backdrop of very moderate rates of growing inflation in advanced countries⁹⁾

In a more general sense, the artist's freedom is naturally complemented and sustained by distribution networks that are engaged in the sale and resale of works of art. Those networks offered a way out of the non-freedom imposed by guild regimentation and out of the commission that was shaped by the customer's taste and will as well as out of hired labor. Unfettered freedom implies an anonymous customer and such customers may only appear through purely economic channels that divided the artist and the customer and rendered their relations perfectly impersonal. But the market mechanism cannot help but abide by its own laws. Thus the lofty art model finds itself in impending and bitter conflict with its own institutional make-up. Cynical commercialism keeps on bringing never-ending pressure to bear upon the exquisite ethos of the artistic message that suffers frequent defeats: "Money creates taste", while the Brahmin of aesthetic belief prefers to sign the side of a check he likes best. The shadow of Mercury follows in the

footsteps of Saturn.

Today's art world is doomed to Manichaeian duality and there is no way for it to escape that duality as long as the paradigms of artistic creation we have accepted continue in force. Their special case deviations of one or another type notwithstanding, those paradigms are still there. There is no such power that would be able to pull apart the schools of thought and practices that are in conflict, let alone destroy one and save another. They can only leave the art scene together. Then the only thing that remains for us to do is to alleviate their confrontation and to protect, as best as we humanly can, the highest cultural model against encroachments upon its institutional double.

Perhaps my pessimistic view of how matters stand now is not quite correct. In any case this is how I see them from the standpoint of the arts and culture which regain their links to the Western art world now and in so doing I entertain relief, hope and anxiety.

Footnotes

- 1) Guggenheim Calendar of Events. Winter of 1989 - 1990
- 2) A. Danto. The Transfiguration of the Commonplace, Cambridge Mass., 1981
- 3) H.S. Becker. Art World and Social Types.-American Behavioral Scientist, July-August 1976, vol. 19, p.p. 703-701
- 4) Mark Kostaby. Upheaval. N.Y. 1985.
- 5) F. Schiller. Letters about aesthetic education. Collected Works, Vol. 6, Moscow, 1957, p. 355 (Russian edition)
- 6) The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art. London, 1986, p.p. 108 and 109.
- 7) F. Schlegel. Ideas. Literary Manifestoes of Western European Romanticists. Moscow, 1980, p. 60 (Russian edition)
- 8) Ibid. p. 61
- 9) R.W. Walker. The Passionate Possessors. ART News. Vol. 89, No 1, January, 1990, p. 124.